

**Independent Hip Hop Artists in Hong Kong:  
Youth Sub-cultural Resistance and Alternative Modes of Cultural Production**

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**Abstract**

In this paper I draw on ethnographic observations, interactions and in-depth interviews with key artists in the independent (indie) hip hop music scenes in Hong Kong to research the biographic stories and independent artistic practices situated in their socioeconomic and youth sub-cultural contexts. Then I analyse these ethnographic findings in relation to Bourdieu's (1993) theoretical framework of "fields of cultural production" and discuss how these youth sub-cultural energies have found for themselves a niche space within the field of cultural production to resist the relentless capitalist practices of the pop culture/music industry.

**Introduction**

My research on the independent hip hop music scene in Hong Kong is carried out by way of biography study of key hip hop artists, specifically, through the case study of a key independent hip hop artist and his associates in Hong Kong. I shall discuss the conditions under which modes of creative cultural production alternative to capitalist modes can be made possible, and how these independent artists tactically find ways to craft out their niche space for survival and for innovative cultural production, sometimes by capitalizing on new media technologies (e.g., the Internet). This is meant to be illustrative of the possible kinds of youth subcultures evolving around

indie hip hop music-making and the kinds of conditions under which a niche space can be made possible for these indie artists to engage in non-mainstream, non-capitalist-driven modes of creative cultural production.

### **Case Study: MC Yan and his circle of indie Hip Hop artists in Hong Kong**

Ma (2002a, 2002b), and his student, Chan (2002) conducted the first serious studies on the local Hong Kong hip hop/rock band, LMF (LazyMuthaFucka) and their youth subcultural practices. Their research provided the methodology and theoretical framework for the pioneering study of alternative music/youth artists in Hong Kong. Four years later, I revisited their research questions and gathered new data from the still-active member, MC Yan, of the disbanded LMF, and seek to write a research sequel to Eric Ma's pioneering studies.

Ma (2002a) presented his research question and his proposed answer to the question as follows:

*"...why there is a sudden 'uprising' of alternative bands in post-1997 Hong Kong? Local bands have a long history of more than a few decades (Chu, 2001). Why is it that their voices have been so distinctive and discernible in the mainstream media since 1998? Critical of mainstream middle-class ideologies, these bands and their music serve as symbolic resources for cultural differentiation and popular resistance among teenagers. They generate strong 'emotional energies', which have been mixing with populist anti-government sentiments of the larger society. This socio-emotive web of sub-cultural politics has become a conspicuous display that marks the particular historical juncture of post-1997 Hong Kong."*

Four years after Ma made the above insightful observation, and nine years into the post-1997 era of Hong Kong, the voices and media coverage of these alternative bands, especially LMF, which received the greatest amount of media attention around 1998 to 2000, have already sunk into obsolete archives, which perhaps only youth cultural studies researchers (like me) might revisit. LMF itself was disbanded in 2003

due to lack of commercial sponsorship and entertainment jobs for them. This is not surprising after the media and the cultural industry has finished exploiting their emotional energies and exhausted their newness (i.e., no longer fresh and sensational), and after the massive hype around these alternative and resistant youth voices/band sound has gradually died out. My research questions for what I conceive as a research sequel to Ma's pioneering studies in the early 2000s are as follows:

- Is there any niche space for the surviving members of these circles of alternative artists to carry on with their youth subcultural resistance practice/project as well as their innovative, creative, artistic projects,
- And if yes, what are the conditions under which such a niche space can be made possible and what are the conditions necessary for sustaining this niche space for this practice/project?

I draw on the ethnographic methodology, mainly by conducting both formal and informal, in-depth, life-history, and other topic-focused interviews, as well as on-line chats. I conducted face-to-face home visits, MSN chats, and telephone interviews and discussion with the key surviving indie hip hop artist, MC Yan. I also participated in some of their gatherings at MC Yan's home studio, and attended in the first protest music concert-cum-League of Socialist Democrats Inauguration Meeting on 1 October 2006, in which MC Yan played a key role in lining up former protest music artists for performing in the public political meeting in Hong Kong. I also analysed the song lyrics of MC Yan's and his apprentice, Chef's (see my earlier paper, Lin, forthcoming), and visited MC Yan's website and web-forum, and observed the forum members' postings and exchanges (<http://www.chinamantaggin.com>).

### **Emotional Energies and Marginalized Youths**

Ma (2002a) delineated the concept of emotional energies of underground bands and

LMF at length:

*“Adapting Collins’ (1990) sociology of emotions, these bands can be seen as active producers of what he calls ‘emotional energies’. They discursively mobilize oppressive energies of social stigmas thrown upon them, turn them around and use these stigmas as their own identity resources for drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. These free flowing emotional energies are charged and re-charged in concerts, stored in CDs, pregnant with self-produced signs and saturated in their own private underground spaces. Life history interviews of band members indicate that most of them were ‘failures’ by elitist standards. They dropped out from school, some had serious problems with their parents, and others had taken up freelance jobs in CD shops, construction sites and delivery companies. Of course there are a few who obtained university degrees, but as a whole, many of them can hardly be considered academic achievers. They do not integrate well into the mainstream. Durkheim asked a fundamental question of sociology: what holds society together? His answer is the mechanisms that produce moral solidarity. Collins (1990) suggests that these mechanisms do so by producing emotions. Yet emotions work both ways. My informants are stigmatized by the general public, but at the same time they exclude themselves from an imagined mainstream society by self-stigmatization. Antagonisms generate negative emotions, which build up barriers between these bands and the society at large. Yet these negative emotional energies are used positively to mobilize in-group solidarity... I try to use the case of alternative bands to explore the emotionality of sub-cultural formation. With emotional energy, I refer to routine as well as dramatic emotions generated, maintained, dissipated and re-charged in interactive rituals within and between communities. It is somewhat similar to the psychological concept of drive. However, emotional energy is more than personal and biographical; it is collective, bodily, interactive, and thus social and structural.” (Ma, 2000a, p. 190)*

The emotional energies of MC Yan and his associates are frequently witnessed both in the way they talk, for instance, in interviews with the researcher (e.g., in a loud, angry voice, especially when talking about mainstream music industry and institutions), and in their artistic works and music. One frequent term used by MC Yan is “the System”, and he clearly classified himself as working, living, struggling, and fighting outside of “the System”. By “the System” he meant the mainstream,

capitalist society and institutions both in Hong Kong and in the world; e.g., the government and the ruling elite of the society, including the middle classes with high-paid jobs and well-recognized social status. He sees himself as a public intellectual and his work as part of the leftist, anti-capitalist, pro-democracy, pro-working-class, and pro-Muslim projects all over the world. He aligned himself with the anti-U.S.-hegemony Muslim youth groups in the Middle East and maintained some relationship with them. This, however, does not mean that MC Yan and his associates are anti-government, but suggests that their emotional energies have partly arisen from being positioned (both by mainstream others and by themselves) as outside of the “System” (i.e., as non-academic achievers, by choice or by circumstances, and thus also as non-beneficiaries of the mainstream, capitalist institutions). As Ma noted (2000a), they turn the tables by using these emotional energies arising from society’s marginalization to draw boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (e.g., establishing “we” and “they” categories) and build their own in-group solidarity (e.g., in their words, “We, the utopians...”, “They, the people with high-pay jobs... they, the music business people”).

### **The complex balancing art of resistance through collusion and compartmentalization**

How do these alternative subcultural youth groups survive in Hong Kong, or in any society? When confronted with “the means of living” question from the researcher, MC Yan was very upfront about their marginal, alternative status, as well as their strategies of survival by both resisting and colluding with (or in his words “exploiting”) the System. MC Yan readily said he did “commercial stuff to support himself”. For instance, for a livelihood, he and his associates (having recently formed a small 2-people company, “4E Creative”, in January 2006) do various indoor

and outdoor visual art projects for different establishments, both private and public, both commercial and non-commercial, for different clients in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, and other parts of Southeast Asia. For keeping their independent hip hop rap music projects alive and well, they sometimes collaborated with Hong Kong Canto-pop star, Edison Chan, who had developed some indie-art orientations, but have recently worked on producing their own indie hip hop music albums in MC Yan's home studio, featuring mainly *Chef*, the young hip hop dance artist ("breaker"), who has also been learning to do freestyle Canto-rap with MC Yan since 2004. Earlier this year, MC Yan did a series of TV commercials for the Japanese fermented milk drink targeted at children, Yakult, and was confronted by some oppositional fans putting up postings on his webforum (<http://www.Chinamantaggin.com>) asking about why he did the commercials. His response to that posting was simply, "I did it for fun." To MC Yan, playing with the System while remaining outside of it (e.g., by working free lance and not having a full-time job tied to/controlled by any establishment) is his tactic of maintaining his resistant stance towards cultural capitalism, especially capitalist commoditization practices in the music business/industry—turning artists and music into "formulaic products without much creativity". In MC Yan's words, music is "a practice, a dialogue, a conversation", and not a "performance, a show, a product or commodity", and doing music is not the same as doing "entertainment". To them the music business/industry is just turning artists into "teen idols" and "entertainers", not really doing music with life and soul.

While some of MC Yan's oppositional fans (e.g., those who posed questions in the webforum querying MC Yan's occasional practice of appearing in sports shoes commercials, ads, magazine cover pages, or sometimes in joint projects with Canto-pop star, Edison Chan) tend to hold a puritan-normative stance towards indie

artists' mode of operation, to survive and to craft out a space for their innovative, creative cultural production, MC Yan and his circle of artists seem to have resorted to the strategy of compartmentalization; i.e., drawing a clear-cut line between: (1) free lance, money-making, commercial projects for mainstream institutions/corporations within the System for their livelihood, and (2) independent, experimental, innovative, artistic projects of their own choice and design (which might or might not be money-making, or might just break-even financially).

While emotional energies themselves can serve the function of building in-group solidarity, it also gives their music and artwork a powerful, youthful, defiant halo, which can be mobilized and utilized by leftist political groups for energizing mass political meetings. We shall turn to a discussion of this in the next section.

**Collaborating with the League of Social Democrats (LSD):  
Indie Hip Hop/Rock music in LSD's inauguration meeting**

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006, the first explicitly leftist local political party modeled on the labour party in Western democratic societies, the League of Social Democrats (LSD), held their low-budget (approximately US\$40,000) first mass public meeting (termed "Inauguration Meeting") in a soccer playground in Mongkok, Hong Kong. For the first time in Hong Kong history has such a political party come into being, and equally for the first time in Hong Kong has such a meeting featured independent hip hop/rock band artists, chiefly through the collaboration between MC Yan and the party's core member, Wong Yuk-Man, a political commentator and critic of the government, and a former popular TV/Radio host of current affairs phone-in programmes. MC Yan told the researcher that Wong invited him to invite some indie hip hop/rock band artists to perform in the political meeting. The monetary reward is nominal (HK\$1,000; i.e., US\$128) and MC Yan said he donated that amount back

to LSD immediately. All the indie artists that performed that night were in their early to mid 30s, and were core indie band artists active in Hong Kong in the 1990s (e.g., Season Lee of former local indie Gothic band, *Virus*). When the researcher asked MC Yan why Wong chose him and also chose this kind of music format to go with his political party meeting, MC Yan said it was partly because the LSD lacked funds to go for TV media publicity, and at the same time probably wanted to try something new, something alternative, something youthful to see if it would work with the public. He characterized this collaboration as a new attempt, as a meeting in the middle of the road by two otherwise very different parties: the political party, and the indie music artists. That night around 2,000 people turned up in the meeting and MC Yan and his associates performed in the opening of the meeting their former popular LMF song (“Lazy Clan”) and their CASH (Composers and Authors Society of Hong Kong) “Best Lyrics Award”-winning song, “Hong Kong Place”, which appeared in Edison Chan’s album (titled “*Please Steal This Album*”) in 2004.

Obviously, this project is not monetarily rewarding for MC Yan and his company but he was, nonetheless, keen on doing it, as expressed in his words on an MSN conversation with the researcher. He saw himself as “a public intellectual” and he said what he did was actually “very, very little”. From the researcher’s point of view, this spontaneous alliance/collaboration with a leftist, pro-working class political party is also likely to add to MC Yan (and his group of artists)’s symbolic capital and prestige when publicly identifying themselves as protest music activists and artists (though this might not be consciously intended by MC Yan himself).

### **The NSBQ Project**

While youth sub-cultural emotional energies can be harnessed by political parties (as in the above-described scenario) or appropriated by capitalist establishments (e.g., by



San Miguel Beer or Adidas business incorporations, which sponsored LMF concerts and added the hip hop/rock band's youthful, defiant, subcultural halo onto their commodities targeted at youth markets, see Ma, 2000a and Chan, 2002), the indie artists themselves can also infuse their own innovative creative projects with other existing defiant symbols from other resistant cultures, traditions and localities to add to their own defiant, resistant, subcultural symbolic capital. MC Yan's NSBQ project is a recent example. NSBQ stands for Ning-Si-Bu-Qu, a 4-character idiom in Mandarin Chinese which literally means: would rather die than submit (i.e., to fight until death). The NSBQ project features a series of subcultural fashion accessories infused with Muslim defiant symbols: NSBQ glasses, NSBQ kaffiya (headwear), NSBQ wristlace, NSBQ AK-47 gun (toy model) (see Appendix 1). These products were designed by MC Yan, drawing on design patterns (e.g., the black-and-white diamond-shape checkerboard pattern) characteristic of the clothes and headcloth (called "Kaffiya") worn by Palestinian resistant groups. MC Yan told the researcher that every NSBQ item has a story behind it. For instance, the NSBQ box holding the other NSBQ items symbolizes the coffin in which a dead resistant fighter is carried; the NSBQ glasses and wristlace are items symbolizing the resistant protester joining in a protest march, wearing these items as symbols of resistance; the AK-47 gun (toy model) symbolizes the resistant force's tool in their revolution/struggle against US domination.

When asked whether these stories are written up alongside the items in the Internet Shop Webpage, MC Yan said those who have a sense of it will be able to decode it ("make sense of it") and there is no need to "draw figures showing internal bowels" (a Chinese idiom meaning: to add redundant details when those details are expected to be well-understood by the audience). This shows that the NSBQ project is targeted

at a specific, trans-local audience, those who are already equipped with the appropriate field-specific cultural capital to recognize, decode, and value the symbolic meaning of the NSBQ fashion accessories. MC Yan also told the researcher that they are trying out the Internet for the first time (e.g., Internet Pay-Pal Shop and e-Bay Auction) as the new platform for publicizing and distributing their NSBQ articles. Part of their profits from the NSBQ project will be donated to some Middle East youth groups (and this intention is not publicized). MC Yan told the researcher that they deliberately inaugurated their e-Bay auction of the NSBQ articles on Sept 11, 2006, to symbolically cross-reference the '911 attack' of the US in 2002. From the researcher's point of view, this specific move, to the appropriate audiences (i.e., those already pre-disposed to decode the products in these ways), would add to the symbolic value of the NSBQ products as well as the artists behind the project. Fig. 1 shows MC Yan dressed in an NSBQ kaffiya and anti-WTO (World Trade Organization) T-shirt, which has the following words printed on it: "I fuck WTO I fuck u too".

**Fig. 1: MC Yan Wearing NSBQ Kaffiya, NSBQ glasses, and Anti-WTO T-Shirt**



The NSBQ logo comprises of four red simplified characters in its specific stencil font type, with the corresponding capital Roman letters (NING SI BU QU) placed beneath a horizontal line beneath the Chinese characters. NING SI BU QU are the “pinyin” letters (i.e., phonetic alphabet) of Putonghua (spoken mandarin Chinese, standard national language of China). Such a design of the logo name carries symbolic meanings and resistant energies too, at least for those who share the

specific Chinese historical-cultural background/knowledge to recognize and decode it. The 4-character-slogan/logo (“Ning-Si-Bu-Qu”, see Appendix for the visual representation of the slogan/logo) can arouse associations of popular campaign slogans written in communist China in the past few decades, although when discussing this interpretation of the researcher’s, MC Yan said he had not intended the logo to be interpreted that way, and in fact he had produced different series of NSBQ logos. The one that the researcher interpreted as carrying associations of the public slogans of Communist China was, however, indeed inspired by the popular way in which public slogans are written in China. But MC Yan had his own interpretation of it. Table 1 shows an excerpt from an MSN interview (conducted on 13 October 2006) in which MC Yan replied to the researcher’s question about why he chose simplified Chinese characters and this red stencil design which resembles the way Mainland Chinese public slogans are written (in Hong Kong, people use complicated characters but in Mainland China, simplified characters have been used since the communist revolution). It can be seen that the NSBQ logo is the artist’s symbolic way of asserting Chinese language and cultural identity and agency in resistance to what is perceived by the artist as a colonial mindset/subjectivity and practice that is still pervasive in Hong Kong—the preference to represent *self* in the colonizer’s language, English. In designing the NSBQ logo in its characteristically Mainland Chinese way, the artist is attempting to create an indigenous Chinese brand name and to assert his indigenous ethnic, cultural, linguistic and political *self* and subjectivity in resistance to what he perceives as cultural and linguistic colonialism of the Anglo-West (euphemized as “modernization”), symbolized chiefly by the English language. (The ironic fact that the MSN interview was conducted in English between the artist and the researcher--both Hong Kong born Chinese--has not been highlighted; the reason for using English in the MSN communication is mainly due to the

researcher's lack of skills in inputting Chinese characters into the computer, and the artist has accommodated the researcher's lack of ability in inputting Chinese by using English in most on-line communication with the researcher; the researcher's lack of the ability to input Chinese characters on computer can also be seen as a result of the former British colonial education system).

**Table 1: Excerpt from an MSN Interview with MC Yan (13 October 2006)**

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**NSBQ has NOT ONLY 1 logo i have made s series of logos, each one has different story**

Angel says:

oic...

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**the Stencil one's Font is MODIFIED from the propaganda slogan form, the only i did is a STENCIL format...inspired by propaganda format of PUBLIC SLOGANS...**

Angel says:

yes, i see...

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**the use of both Chinese but non-sense English letters is the MOST COMMON use in china today....**

Angel says:

yes, haha... ..

Angel says:

the nonsense english letters are actually pth pinyin letters of the chinese characters, right?

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**and the reason that i dont use an english name is simply because i prefer people of the world recognize a chinese brand and learn at least 4 chinese words from there...**

Angel says:

yes, they need to learn chinese!

Angel says:

it's a unique chinese brand right?

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**chinese people are NOT automatically English Writing people...to use english to please/attract ppl worldwide...Colonism is THE PAST...**

Angel says:

yes,

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**it is the attitude of a chinese , towards the world...**

Angel says:

the attitude that we have our own language and we can represent ourselves using our own language, right?

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**but NOT a HK guy filled with colonized blood...**

Angel says:

ok ... :0...

福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD says:

**we can INTRODUCE OURSELVES to the world by using our own creativity, not just using english to make a "i'm modernized" "modern world attached" image...**

Note: Angel represents the researcher; 福建音樂 Fu©Kin Music@LSD represents the indie hip hop artist, MC Yan)

It can be argued that the emotional energies of youth subcultural groups (e.g., underground bands, alternative music groups) that Ma (2002a, 2002b) described and theorized seem to have taken on new trajectories after the LMF was disbanded. These youth subcultural emotional energies, in the form of MC Yan's innovative art projects, have been re-directed/re-channeled to merge with the various trans-local resistant emotional energies embodied in diverse localities, cultures, traditions and sociopolitical grievances and movements (e.g., the pro-working class, leftist party—LSD—in Hong Kong, the anti-US-domination Muslim youth groups in the Middle East, the South Korean peasants' anti-WTO protests in December 2005 in Hong Kong). And in this re-directing/re-channeling process, the youth subcultural emotional energies that were originally born of/embodied in a local Hong Kong indie hip hop/rock band are transformed, re-charged, and re-vigorated, mainly through symbolic and artistic refashioning to align and resonate with larger, trans-local, resistant, sociopolitical groups, forces, parties, projects, cultures, and traditions.

### **Cultural differentiation and different fields of cultural production: The struggle for legitimacy between different social groups**

What are the conditions under which indie artists can maintain their integrity and craft out a niche space to do their innovative work of cultural production? It seems that even in such a highly capitalist society as Hong Kong, there still exists the possibility of carving out a niche space for these artists. Bourdieu (1993) discussed two different fields of cultural production: (1) the field of restricted production (FRP), and (2) the field of large-scale production (FLP) (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Different Fields of Cultural Production**

	<b>Field of Restricted Production (FRP)</b>	<b>Field of Large-Scale Production (FLP)</b>
Value	Symbolic value is greater than economic value Long-term accumulation rather than short-term exchange	Emphasis on economic value
Goal	Limited production Attaining cultural legitimacy	Large-scale production
Autonomy	High autonomy Can establish one's standards of judgment	Wholly consumer-driven

Based on Bourdieu (1993)

It seems that MC Yan's artistic production can be classified under the first column of FRF, i.e., as cultural production within the field of restricted production. The "fields of cultural production are *universes of belief* which can only function in so far as they succeed in simultaneously producing products and the need for those products..." (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 82; italics added). For Bourdieu, the specific

economy of the cultural field is based on a particular form of *belief* concerning what constitutes a cultural (e.g., literary, artistic) work and its aesthetic or social value (Johnson, 1993). Up against the dominant groups (e.g., the dominant, powerful music/cultural business incorporations) who occupy privileged positions in the field of cultural production, how do independent artists (such as MC Yan and his group) seek to challenge these belief systems and claim legitimacy of their own system of aesthetic standards and judgments (e.g., claims to what counts as “real” hip hop; what counts as “real” music and art)? Bourdieu points out that “those in dominant positions operate essentially defensive strategies, designed to perpetuate the status quo by maintaining themselves and the principles on which their dominance is based” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 83). It seems that the subversive strategy employed by independent artists involves efforts in developing their own autonomous field of restricted cultural production, by developing their own logic/principles governing both the circulation of symbolic goods and the production of consumers. As Bourdieu (1993) says:

*“... One need only compare the functional logic of the field of restricted production with the laws governing both the circulation of symbolic goods and the production of the consumers to perceive that such an autonomously developing field, making no reference to external demands, tends to nullify the conditions for its acceptance outside the field. To the extent that producers require extremely scarce instruments of appropriation, they are bound to precede the market or to have no clients at all, apart from the producers themselves. Consequently they tend to fulfill socially distinctive functions, at first in conflicts between fractions of the dominant class and eventually, in relations among social classes...”* (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 120).

In the case of MC Yan and his circle of artists, however, it seems that they do have clients, although from restricted strata of society, and in fact, clients from all over the world. By aligning and merging their artistic symbols with leftist, resistant

symbols of diverse strands: working class resistance against capitalist exploitation and the middle class/business class, ruling elite (e.g., collaborating with the first labor party in Hong Kong—the LSD); Muslim cultural and political resistance to American and capitalist domination in the world; resistance of the Korean peasants to WTO (World Trade Organization) and WTO's free-trade capitalist principles which destroy indigenous groups and their means of livelihood, and so on. The struggle/battle is thus fought at both the cultural, symbolic, artistic level and the social and political level, and their well-chosen slogan-cum-logo (NSBQ—NING SI BU QU—FIGHT UNTIL DEATH) captures well the stance and agency of this cultural-cum-social/political struggle not only between social classes (e.g., the marginalized groups in Hong Kong vs. the middle classes/business classes running the society), but also between different conflicting cultural and sociopolitical groups/forces in the world (e.g., Muslim youths against American domination).

The angry, emotional energies of what started as youth subcultures born of marginalization by middle class institutions (e.g., the schooling system that privileges youths with middle class capital; see Lin, 1999, 2005) (e.g., embodied in early forms in the practice and activities of the hip hop/rock band, LMF) have been channeled and merged into the global resistant movements of different but converging strands, and thus gaining cultural legitimacy for their field of cultural production. By drawing on these existing trans-local resistant forces, energies, cultures, traditions, and their symbols for inspiration in his cultural production/creation, MC Yan, with his NSBQ project team of artists, has pioneered in Hong Kong an innovative way of carving out a niche space. They do so by developing their own field of restricted cultural production, which, nonetheless, draws on powerful, existing symbols of cultural legitimacy (e.g., the leftist movement in Hong Kong and in the world, the Muslim indigenous cultural movement all over the world), as well as the existing consumers,



or clients with the right attitude and cultural capital to recognize and decode the meaning and value of their NSBQ artworks/products.

The symbolic value of MC Yan's artistic works is thus greater than their economic value, and his NSBQ project releases only a small, limited number of NSBQ items (limited editions). The appropriate audiences/clients (those already equipped with the appropriate cultural capital; i.e., already predisposed to recognize, decode and value the symbolic meanings, stories, and resistant energies encoded in his artistic products) constitute his potential sponsors, and they exist across national, cultural, religious, and linguistic boundaries on the Internet (MC Yan's group is the first Hong Kong indie artist group to use the Internet Pay-Pal Shop as the trans-local distribution channel). By deliberately choosing Sept 11 as the inauguration date for the e-Bay auction on his NSBQ series this year, MC Yan has again drawn on the Muslim resistant energies, ideologies, and symbols for his NSBQ products, in an "instance of consecration" in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 121), which has the function of conferring cultural authority and legitimacy, in the struggle for the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of symbolic violence (i.e., for producing, inducing, and legitimating a certain type of belief):

*"... Just as in the case of the system of [cultural] reproduction, in particular the educational system, so the field of [cultural] production and diffusion can only be fully understood if one treats it as a field of competition for the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of symbolic violence. Such a construction allows us to define the field of restricted production as the scene of competition for the power to grant cultural consecration, but also as the system specifically designed to fulfill a consecration function as well as a system for reproducing producers of a determinate type of cultural goods, and the consumer capable of consuming them."* (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 121; words in square brackets added)

The above Bourdieu-sian analysis of the indie artists' work might give the reader the impression that the artists have been rationally calculating and reflecting on their

own endeavors. While it seems that MC Yan is highly conscious of his own work methods and strategies, it must be pointed out that he also impresses the researcher as truly and passionately believing in these resistant movements and their values and worldviews; i.e., unlike some capitalist desire-driven incorporations which manipulatively appropriate the resistant energies of various youth subcultural groups/movements without subscribing to their belief systems, MC Yan and his independent group of artists do not do their work for maximizing profit or business expansion (that kind of motive will turn them into calculating capitalists), but for the basic need of surviving on the one hand, and also more importantly, for claiming cultural and aesthetic legitimacy for their own innovative, creative production on the other. It seems that their greatest satisfaction comes not from making the greatest amount of money or financial expansion, which is quite unlikely given their restricted field of production, but from gaining a certain degree of agency and power in subverting the value system of the dominant cultural field; i.e., in their aesthetic, cultural, philosophical as well as social and political struggle against the dominant social groups in society and the world, who not only govern standards about what counts as good music and art, but also impose their values, way of life, way of doing business, and worldviews (i.e., governing norms regarding what counts as the good life, the good person, the good citizen, etc.) as the only legitimate ones in society and the world—i.e., monopolizing the legitimate exercise of symbolic violence.

However, for the niche space carved out by indie artists to be sustainable, it seems that a few conditions also need to obtain. Through my observations of and interactions with MC Yan and his group of artists, I have outlined the necessary conditions as follows:

- The indie artists must have a huge repertoire of diversified cultural capital.

That is, they must be very versatile and have multiple talents. For instance,

MC Yan is talented in his creative work in music, lyrics, visual art design, graffiti, multiple media and innovative art forms, apart from possessing updated knowledge about financial planning, licensing, copyright issues, Internet distribution mechanism, Pay-Pal and e-Bay auction systems, and so on. They also need to oversee the production of an artistic object from design to factory production (e.g., MC Yan's team regularly visits Mainland China to source craftsmen and factories to produce their designed artistic objects).

- The indie artists must enjoy a high reputation within their own artistic field. That is, within the field of indie art production, people must recognize their name and their artistic works as enjoying a good reputation of high quality.
- The indie artists must have good connections across different arenas and social fields. That is, they must have a considerable amount of social capital. For instance, MC Yan is well-known in multiple fields, in the indie music and visual art design circles, both locally and overseas. For instance, MC Yan has been commissioned with art design projects by museums in different places in China and Southeast Asia, and has artistic friends and connections all over Asia and in Europe.
- The indie artists must also be willing to accept a modest way of life. That is, they need to be satisfied with a modest level of material comfort. While they can survive with their artistic work, they are not driven by the insatiable need to accumulate money and capital for re-investment for expansion and further profit-making. What they have earned they probably will spend away soon in their innovative, experimental, financially risk-taking projects. However, in this way they enjoy autonomy in creative cultural production; they are not driven by the need to please and attract masses of consumers. They can

create and experiment according to their own artistic desires and pleasures—i.e., for their own creative satisfaction.

### **Coda**

By using the case study of MC Yan and his group of artists, I illustrated the possibility of channeling and re-directing youth subcultural emotional and creative energies into larger, trans-local, artistic and sociopolitical projects. Although the mainstream capitalist institutions are powerful and dominant, indie hip hop artists (such as the case of MC Yan and his friends) are able to carve out a niche space for autonomous cultural production and creative artistic projects. While it is true that not every group of indie artists can successfully carve out and sustain such a niche space, it seems that if certain conditions (such as those outlined above) obtain, there does exist the possibility of cultural production alternative to the modes driven by capitalist desires (e.g., the drive for maximizing profit, cutting down production cost, aiming at large-scale production and massive consumer markets). Further research with more indie artist groups in different contexts will shed more light on the nature of these conditions and on the possibility of channeling (marginalized) youths' subcultural emotional energies into trans-local, sustainable projects of creative cultural production and autonomous artistic innovative projects, which are very much needed if our cultural life is to have enough creative emotional energies and diversities alternative to those dominated by the relentless modes of large-scale, consumer-driven cultural production characterizing many advanced capitalist societies.

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## Appendix

NSBQ Project Articles Featured on the Pay-Pal Shop on the Internet (retrieved from:  
<http://www.nsbq.org/shop.html>)

NSBQ rev.Tools

